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ABSTRACT

The issues of power and control, emotionality, style of communication, and values are related to the interactions between a woman therapist and a male client. Men have learned to function in interpersonal relationships by using control, power and competition. The unresolved issues of control and power between a therapist and client may contribute to defensiveness and an inability to communicate and disclose. Men also have difficulty in revealing weaknesses and openly expressing feelings. Differences between feminine and masculine communication styles and stereotypically masculine values may also contribute to a breakdown in the therapeutic relationship. A male may feel threatened and insecure by a competent female. The potential for effective therapy may be significantly reduced without an understanding of how male sex roles and male socialization affect the therapeutic alliance. (RC)

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ISSUES IN WOMEN COUNSELING MEN: A DISCUSSION

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ISSUES IN WOMEN COUNSELING MEN: A DISCUSSION

Much has been written recently regarding the process of sex role socialization and sex differences in our culture. O'Neil (1979) goes so far as to say American society is currently experiencing a sex role re-evaluation. The 1960's and early 1970's gave us the Women's Liberation movement, consciousness raising and the advent of feminist therapy. As we enter the 1980's a critical eye is turning to men's sex role development and the implications of male socialization in our society.

As therapists, we are quickly becoming aware of the significant themes of masculinity which are relevant to counseling men. And more specifically, as female therapists it is of extreme importance that we begin to take a careful look at those issues and attempt to unravel some of the significant areas of concern. With more and more women entering the counseling professions, an awareness of the major issues becomes an imperative. It is our content that the potential for effective therapy may be significantly reduced without an understanding of how male sex roles and male socialization affect the therapeutic alliance. Our task is to present and discuss the major issues confronting a woman counseling a male client.

In reviewing the literature, one is struck by the limited amount of reference material available. Although some of the issues involved in male/female relationships have been briefly mentioned within a few studies and articles, there has been no comprehensive review of the issues confronting women counseling men.

In presenting this discussion, the authors highlight a number of major issues which emerge as significant for the therapeutic relationship. This discussion does not represent an exhaustive list of issues but rather a preliminary examination of concerns. While four major issues are explored, the reader must be aware that these issues are not independent of each other, but rather interdependent, and at times overlapping.

Power, Control and Competitiveness

Recently, much has been written concerning men's socialized use of power, control and competition as a means of confirming their masculinity (O'Neil, 1979). During early development, men are socialized to be competitive, and the continued need to compete contributes significantly to the strain and anxiety felt by the typical male (Fosteau, 1974; Nichols, 1975). Men have learned to function within their interpersonal relationships by using control, power and competition. This style allows them to maintain their superiority and consequently they have difficulty giving up power and control as this may pose a threat to their masculinity. Therapy places males in a dependent, vulnerable, and self-disclosive position. And while these qualities may be conducive to problem solving and communication, the unresolved issues of control and power between therapist and client may contribute to resistance, defensiveness, and an inability to communicate and disclose. Fear of appearing "weak" in the eyes of a woman may cause the male client to be uncomfortable within the therapeutic relationship. While these issues may also surface with a male therapist, they appear to be more pronounced in the female/male therapeutic relationship.

Emotionality

Closely related to the issue of power and control is the element described by Skovholt et al. (1978) as the restrictive emotionality of males. This concept suggests that men have difficulty openly expressing feelings. Jourard (1971) reports that males disclose much less personal information about themselves to others than do women. Men are seen as intellectualizing their feelings, solving their problems in a rational and logical manner and subsequently they are finding themselves unable to communicate openly and intimately. By expressing feelings and admitting weakness, some men within the therapeutic setting may feel moved to a "one down" position. These difficulties in the expression of feelings as well as with self disclosure must be addressed in the therapeutic setting as they are essential components of emotional intimacy.

Style of Communication

Popular literature has also discussed men's differences and difficulties in interpersonal communication. Male style of communication, referred to as "instrumental", has been described as problem solving, goal oriented, rational and factual, while the stereotypically female style has been called "expressive" (Olson, 1978).

Given these different styles, the potential for communication breakdown exists. Many men believe their style of communication is superior to women's style and may use this problem solving approach as a means of maintaining control within the therapeutic relationship. The existance of two different levels of communication can create a breakdown in the relationship, leading to power and control struggles and potentially unresolved termination. Since both communication patterns are essential

for a fully functioning relationship, how the female therapist resolves these issues may determine successful outcome in therapy.

Values

The "masculine mystique", its values and assumptions, is based on rigid sex roles stereotypes and beliefs about men and masculinity. Brannon (1976) delineated the various components of the male role and found four themes which seem valid in regard to stereotyped male role behavior. Specifically, he described; a) the need to be different from women, b) the need to be superior to others, c) the need to be independent and self reliant, and d) the need to be more powerful than others. How these values conflict with the goals of therapy and the therapeutic relationship need to be explored.

Given the stereotype of masculine notions, a male may be made to feel threatened and insecure by the "competent women," (Brenton, 1966), personified by the female therapist. The male client may attempt to usurp the therapist's power by trying to "win you over to his side," or by resisting the therapist's interventions (Marino, 1979).

Counseling, which encourages vulnerability, abdication of control, and intensive examination of one's life, may be viewed as conflicting with traditional masculine values. The anxiety generated by this conflict may make the entire process of counseling difficult to initiate. In fact, it may take a crisis situation before a male may enter the therapeutic relationship. With a crisis, often comes the recognition and motivation to "build a new life structure without the past burdens of restrictive

socialization (Mayer, 1978). Thus allowing the process of sex role re-evaluation to emerge.

Having considered these four major issues, one might suspect that a male would be better off seeking help from a male therapist. On the contrary, evidence exists to support the view that opposite sex dyads may communicate more effectively than same sex dyads (Brooks, 1974; Fuller, 1963). Potential for self-disclosure was found to be higher for male/female dyads than male/male dyads. Secondly, one must consider the barriers to intimacy among men. Male therapist may unwittingly reinforce the traditional masculine values and communication styles. The male therapist may perpetuate instrumental communication and inhibit emotional openness and expression. Lewis (1978) found that female/male dyads are more conducive to emotional openness and communication. Aries (1976) also reported that men were limited in their degree of intimacy in their relationships with other men.

While the female/male dyad may be more conflict laden, it seems to offer greater potential for growth, because through conflict and resistance and the resolution of these issues, growth is fostered.

As female therapist, we need to be aware of and appreciate the issues and threats potentially involved when men become more intimate with themselves. An understanding and awareness of male role socialization is critical and an understanding of how these issues affect the therapeutic alliance must be carefully examined if we are to be effective therapists. We have attempted to present these issues and hope to stimulate further discussion and research in this area.

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